



Fear is a natural human emotion. But what happens when it takes over your life?

By Matthew Hutson

As You Read

Think about how fears can be overcome.

For years, Kyle Hargreaves, 13, had a secret fear. It wasn't a fear of snakes or spiders. It wasn't a fear of heights or water. Kyle was afraid of costumed characters, like the ones you see hugging little kids at theme parks and the mascots you see goofing around at sporting events.

Such characters caused Kyle to experience true terror. His heart would pound. Sweat would pour down his face. He would have trouble breathing.

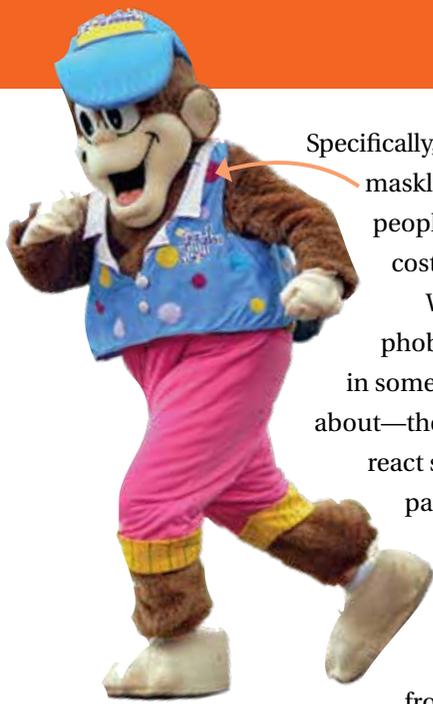
What's wrong with me? Kyle wondered.

Kyle tried to control his fear, but he couldn't. As time went by, the problem only seemed to get worse. Then one day, at a hockey game near his hometown of Reading, Pennsylvania, the sight of mascots caused Kyle such distress that his dad thought Kyle was having a stroke.

What Is a Phobia?

Kyle was suffering from a phobia: an extreme, **irrational**, and lasting fear of something.





Specifically, he was suffering from masklophobia: fear of people in masks and costumes.

When people with phobias encounter—or in some cases, just think about—the thing they fear, they react severely. They may panic, vomit, or feel like they are going to pass out.

Millions of Americans suffer from phobias. Scientists aren't sure what exactly causes them, but they do know they are related to fear.

Survival Tool

We all experience fear from time to time. It's the feeling when our hearts pound at the top of a roller coaster or when we jump out of our seats during a scary movie. Fear is also what keeps us from wandering into traffic or getting too close to a campfire. That's because fear is a survival tool—its point is to help us stay alive.

So how does it work? Biologically, fear is the result of a reaction that takes place mainly in two parts of our brains: the amygdala [uh-MIG-duh-luh] and the prefrontal cortex.

When we detect something that could be a threat, the amygdala, which processes emotion, causes us

to react swiftly. We become instantly alert, perhaps breaking into a sweat or jerking away. Then the cortex, which processes our thoughts, helps us decide what to do next.

Let's say, for example, you're hiking through the woods and you see something that looks like a poisonous snake. Your amygdala tells your body to jump back. Then the cortex comes along and helps you decide either *Yes, that is a snake, and I am going to move away from it now*, or *No, that is just a branch, so I can relax and resume my hike*.

This complex biological reaction is all part of something known as “fight-or-flight,” which prepares our bodies to respond quickly to danger. When our fight-or-flight response is activated—whether by a real threat or not—our hearts race, increasing blood flow to our muscles so we can run fast or fight hard. Meanwhile, our brains pump hormones into our bodies that make us alert and focused so we can cope with the situation at hand.

Phobia vs. Fear

But having a phobia is different from simply being afraid of something. With a phobia, the fight-or-flight response is triggered by something that isn't as threatening as the person feels it is. And the feelings of terror don't go away. People with phobias often understand that their fears are irrational, yet they feel helpless to stop them.

Given the intensity of the terror, it's understandable that people with phobias sometimes go to extreme

COMMON PHOBIAS

19 million Americans suffer from phobias. These are some common ones.



ARACHNOPHOBIA
fear of spiders



PTEROMERHANOPHOBIA
fear of flying



OPHIDIOPHOBIA
fear of snakes



TRYPANOPHOBIA
fear of needles

HOW TO FACE YOUR FEARS

We all experience fear from time to time. Here are 5 tips from the experts on how to conquer what scares you.

1 Get some rest. Sleep is always important, but it's even more important when you're stressed, says Stephanie Woodrow, a mental health counselor who specializes in anxiety disorders. Get at least eight hours of sleep, especially the night before an event you're anxious about, like a big test or a swim meet.



2 Don't avoid what you're afraid of. Getting out of your comfort zone can help you grow. But if you're dealing with a phobia, experts recommend working with a professional.

3 Limit caffeine. If you're feeling anxious, caffeine can make the problem worse by making you jittery, says Woodrow. So if you're scared of public speaking, for example, skip that energy drink or soda before your big class presentation.



4 Talk to someone. Feeling like a fear or phobia is taking over your life is a sign that it's time to seek help. Talk to a trusted adult, such as a parent, guardian, teacher, school counselor, or coach, and let them know you are struggling so they can get you the support you need.

5 Exercise. Exercise, says Woodrow, releases feel-good hormones in the body called endorphins, and endorphins can reduce anxiety. Go for a walk, take a dance break, or kick a ball around.



lengths to avoid the thing they fear. Someone with claustrophobia—fear of small, enclosed spaces—might walk up 30 flights of stairs rather than step into an elevator, for example. For Kyle, his phobia led him to avoid sports games, amusement parks, theme restaurants, and any other place where he might encounter a costumed character.

But avoidance makes phobias worse, says Amit Etkin, a professor of psychiatry at Stanford University. If you don't interact with the thing that scares you, your brain will never accept that it's not harmful, and the fear can become even more exaggerated. That's why people with phobias are encouraged to work with a mental health professional, such as a psychologist or a counselor, to face their fears in a safe and healthy way.

Getting Help

And that is exactly what Kyle decided to do. Not long after the hockey game, his dad took him to the Child Study Center at Virginia Tech. There, Kyle was treated with a technique called Exposure Response and Prevention, in which patients with phobias are gradually exposed to what frightens them. For example, a patient with arachnophobia slowly moves closer to a spider. Over time, when nothing bad happens, the feeling of fear around spiders lessens.

Kyle's treatment began when he was greeted by a man carrying a bunny costume. Kyle started to panic but didn't run away. He knew he needed to face his fear. Once Kyle felt calm, the man put on the body of the costume but not the head. Kyle again became anxious, but eventually he relaxed. Then the two played basketball. After a while, the man put on the head and other costumed characters joined the game.

Kyle was anxious every step of the way. By the end of the day, though, his fear had **dissipated**.

That evening, he and his dad went to an annual event at Virginia Tech called "Gobblerfest," where they interacted with many mascots. Kyle felt no **trepidation** at all. At one point, he even high-fived one of the mascots. To prevent his phobia from returning, Kyle had

to interact with costumed characters several times a week for a month.

To celebrate Kyle's new, fear-free relationship with costumed characters, his family decided to take a trip.

Where did they go?
Disney World. ●



TURN
THE PAGE



CONQUERING FEAR

On a quest for bravery, young Miobe must face a terrifying beast.

Once upon a time in a village in Ethiopia, there lived a boy who was so shy and fearful of the world around him that his family and friends and neighbors called him Miobe: “frightened one.”

“Why do you call me that?” the boy asked.

They laughed. “Because you are afraid.”

Miobe pondered these words. He decided he must find a way to overcome his fear. So, he packed a sack and set off into the world to find what he feared—and to conquer it.

That night, he slept under the wide umbrella of the sky and stared up at the darkness. Before drifting off to sleep, he whispered to himself, “I see you, but I will conquer you, fear.”

At midnight, the wolves began to howl. The sound woke Miobe, but instead of running away, he walked toward the sound, saying aloud, “I will conquer you, fear.” He walked until the sun began to rise, and when

he saw its golden orb, he smiled with relief, for he had survived the first night. “I am becoming brave,” he said as he walked on.

Soon he came to a village. *I don’t know these people at all*, he thought. *They might be unkind to a stranger.* But he straightened up and walked into the village, saying aloud, “I will conquer you, fear.”

He found the village **elders** muttering among themselves. As Miobe came near, they looked up and **sneered**. “Who are you?”

“I’m traveling the world to become brave.”

The elders laughed. “Fool! No one can find bravery where it does not exist.”

“What do you mean?” Miobe asked.

The elders sighed unhappily. “We are doomed,” said one man. “Our village is threatened by a monster.” Miobe followed the man’s gaze to the top of the mountain. “See him, there,” the man said.

Miobe squinted. He did not want to insult the man, but he saw nothing.

“Look,” said another man. “See? It has the head of a crocodile. A monstrous crocodile!”

“And the body of a gigantic hippopotamus!” cried another man.

“It’s like a dragon!” yet another man cried. “With fire shooting from its snout!”

Now Miobe began to see the monster—the smoke and fire, the wrinkled skin, the fiery eyes. “I see,” he said, but silently he promised himself he would not be afraid.

Everywhere, people in the village **covered**. Children hid inside, refusing to go to school. “If the children go outside,” the women said, “the monster will come down from the mountain and eat them. Everyone knows monsters eat children.”

Farmers **hovered** in their doorways, hoes and rakes in hand; outside, their horses stood unharnessed. “We cannot work,” they told Miobe. “If we go into the fields, the monster will come down and get us.”

Miobe saw goats, sheep, and cows wandering out at the edge of the village; no one came to milk them or tend to them. No one planted crops. Few left their homes. “The monster is going to destroy us!” they whispered among themselves as Miobe listened.

Finally, Miobe decided it was up to him to destroy the monster.

“I wish to conquer fear,” he announced, “and so I shall climb the mountain and slay the monster!”

“No, son, don’t do it!” the elders cried. “You will die.”

Miobe shivered and his heart fluttered, but he was determined. “I must conquer fear!” he said.

At the base of the mountain, Miobe looked up and felt a chill. The monster appeared bigger and more fiery than any

dragon, fiercer than a pack of wolves or a nest of snakes. He remembered the days when he was afraid.

With a deep breath, he began to climb.

As he climbed, he looked up, but now he saw the monster seemed smaller. “How peculiar,” he said aloud.

He continued to climb. Halfway up, he looked again. He squinted, shielding his eyes, but the monster’s eyes no longer seemed as fierce, the flames no longer shot from its snout.

“The closer I get, the smaller he looks,” Miobe said, puzzled. He continued to climb, pulling his dagger from his sack so that he would be prepared.

As he came around a bend in the path, he saw the summit before him.

He gasped. The monster had disappeared.

Miobe looked behind him. Surely the creature would sneak up from behind to attack. But when he turned, he saw nothing. He heard nothing. He held his breath.

Then he continued on until at last, he reached the top. All was empty and quiet. Nothing was there.

Suddenly, he heard a sound at his feet. He looked down and saw a little creature—a toad with wrinkled skin and round, frightened eyes.

“How did you become so small?” he asked.

The monster said nothing, so Miobe cradled it in his hands and walked down the mountain.

When he reached the village, the people cried, “He’s safe!” and they surrounded him. Miobe held out his hands and showed them the tiny wrinkled toad.

“This is the monster,” he said.

“What is your name?” the elder asked the toad.

The creature croaked, and the elder looked up at the crowd and said, “Miobe has brought us the monster. Its name is fear.” ●



Writing Contest

Nelson Mandela once said, “I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it.” What do you think he meant? How does his quote apply to the article and the folktale? Answer both questions in an essay. Send it to **Conquering Fear Contest**. Five winners will get *Last Meeting of the Gorilla Club* by Sara Nickerson. See page 2 for details.



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